Animation™ MAGAZINE

Volume 1, Issue 4

U.S. $3.00 / Canada $4.50

ARE ANIMATORS FILMMAKERS?

TIM BURTON
Animator/Filmmaker

Inside:

America's new hero of Mouseville?

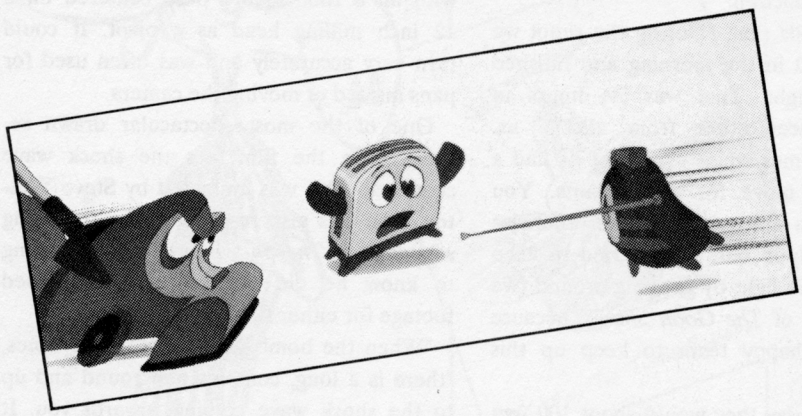
What is Jay Ward really like?

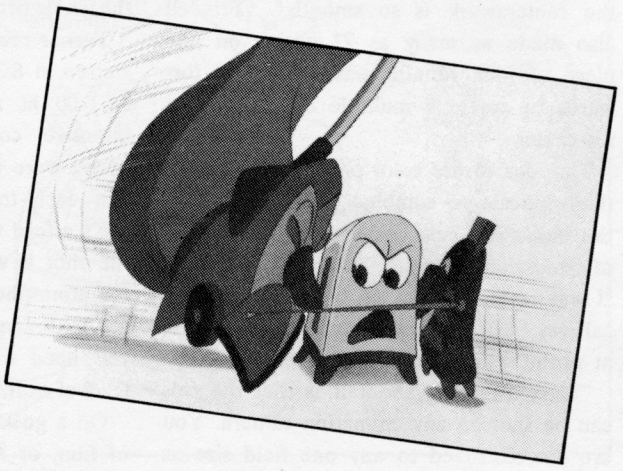
"The Brave Little Toaster"

"The Wizard of Speed and Time"

"When The Wind Blows"

FILMMAKING IS FILMMAKING





Jerry Rees and the Making of *The Brave Little Toaster*

By Steven Paul Leiva

"The greatest challenge in commercial filmmaking today is to produce a full length animated feature of quality and broad general appeal that generates substantial profits for its distribution company and its makers."

Daily Variety, *October 25, 1983*

When I wrote the above, I was associated with a group of people who hoped to accept that challenge and successfully see it through. I was the Director of Animation Development for Kinetographics, a production company owned by Gary Kurtz, the producer of *American Graffiti* and *Star Wars*. The others included Brad Bird, who made the animated *Family Dog* episode of *Amazing Stories*, and Jerry Rees.

We wanted to accept the challenge for a number of reasons, some fiercely idealistic, some--we felt--quite practical, not the least of these was that we believed that no one else was prepared to do this. This included Disney and Bluth, for, by their own choice, they were continuing to ghettoize themselves in the children's market, a choice that we were convinced would limit the profits of all their animated features. We, on the other hand, were interested in animated films that had broad general appeal just like the bulk of mainstream Hollywood live-action pictures, and not exclusively kid flicks. We wanted, eventually, to gross over $100 million for one of our films, and not find ourselves roadblocked somewhere in the $40 million range.

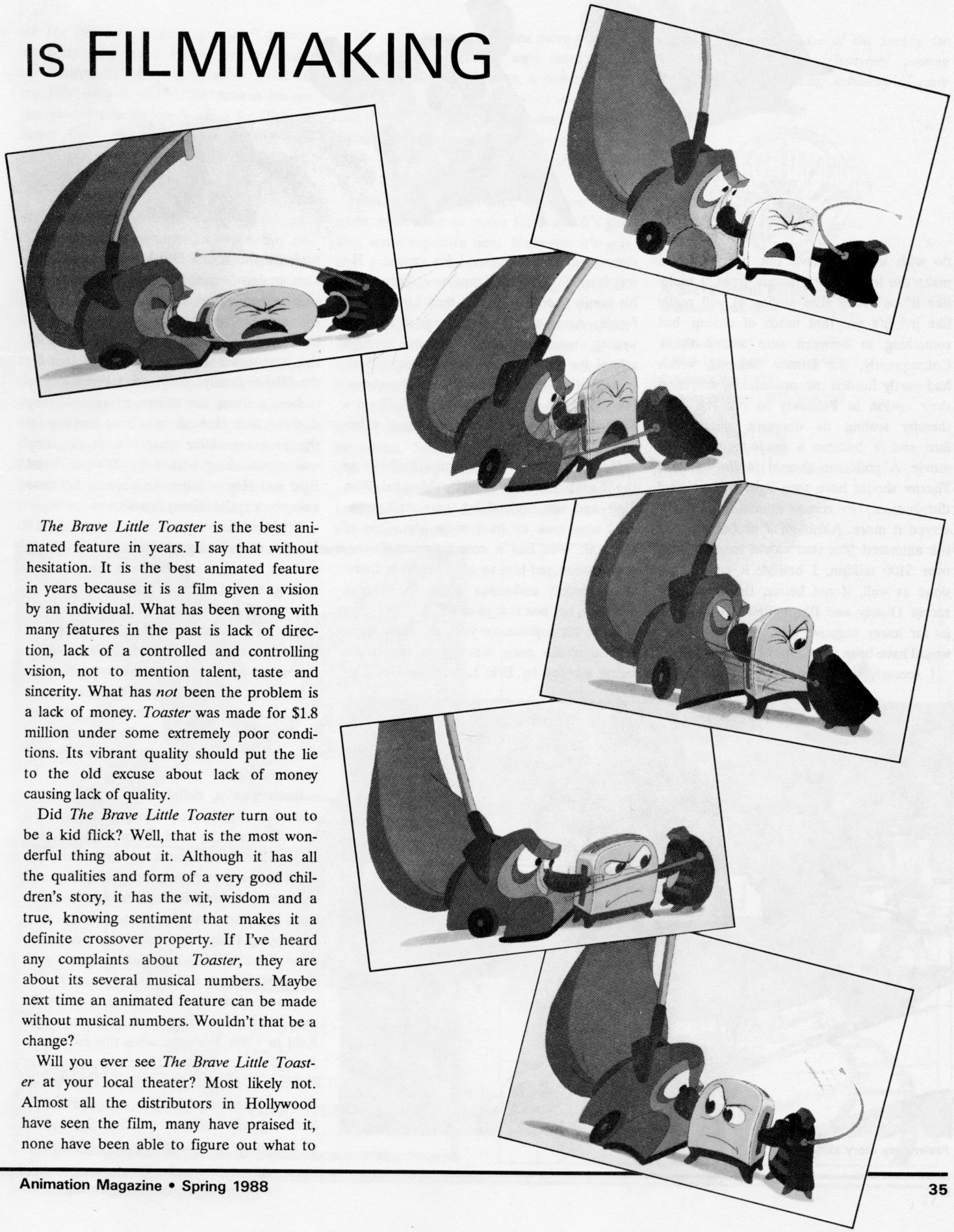
What we hoped would meet this challenge was a film based on Will Eisner's 1940s comic book, *The Spirit*. We wanted to create a super hero film noir that featured no cute animals, except for a few sewer rats which we would not bless with language. Yes, an animated feature about human beings that featured a full range of adult emotions, thus allowing our animators the opportunity to work on something they might actually be interested in. We were convinced that if we could make this film it would be the *Star Wars* of animation, leading animation to a new day, out of bondage and into the promised land.

The film never got made. We got turned down by every studio in town. And it was a "big" film that demanded the backing and resources of a Hollywood major. Independent financing could not have made this picture happen. Eventually, we lost our option and it was later made as a campy live-action pilot/TV movie by Warner Bros.

The four of us sort of went our different ways and I lost track of what Jerry was doing. So when I did hear from him, imagine my disappointment: He had been asked to write and direct an animated kid flick for an ex-Disney executive on a minuscule budget about--and this was the worst bit--a bunch of anthropomorphic electric appliances to be called--no, this was the worst bit--*The Brave Little Toaster*. But Jerry said there was potential here if he was allowed true creative control of the project. He was not fooling himself, he knew all the burdens attached to the project, including having to go to Taiwan to get it made. But if the writing was good; if he could direct it well; if he could have at least a few good American animators on it ... I wished him luck and shook my head.

After he returned from Taiwan, Jerry invited me to a screening. I entered the theater hopefully, but I had to face it, it was a kid flick called *The Brave Little Toaster*. Only my respect for Jerry's talent and that of the American crew gave me any hope. It wasn't just whether the film would be "good" or not that concerned me; it was whether--if it was a good film--it could have any kind of impact on the future of the commercial viability of animation. The lights dimmed. The film ran. I watched. I exited the theater in rapture.

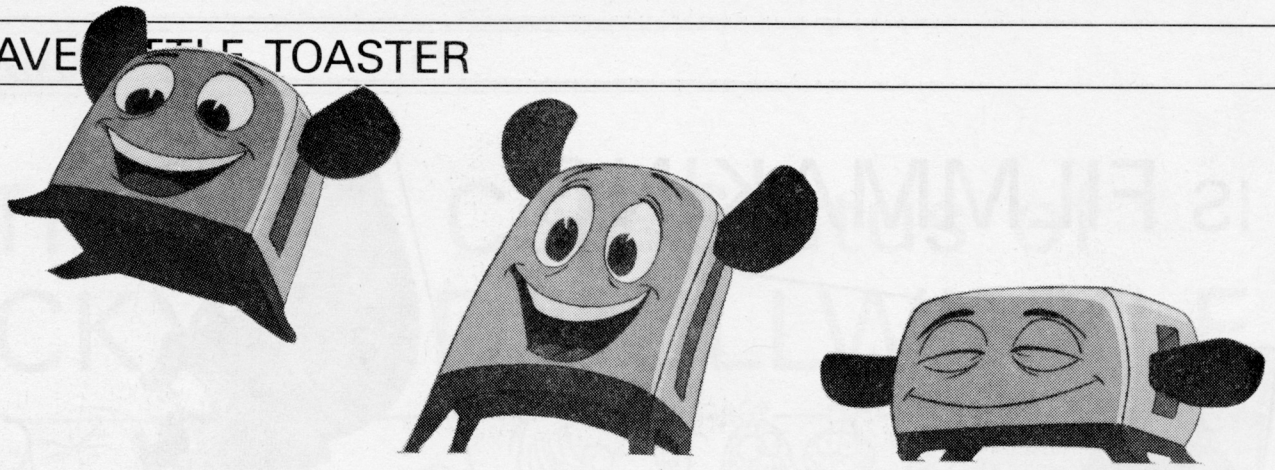
IS FILMMAKING



The Brave Little Toaster is the best animated feature in years. I say that without hesitation. It is the best animated feature in years because it is a film given a vision by an individual. What has been wrong with many features in the past is lack of direction, lack of a controlled and controlling vision, not to mention talent, taste and sincerity. What has *not* been the problem is a lack of money. *Toaster* was made for $1.8 million under some extremely poor conditions. Its vibrant quality should put the lie to the old excuse about lack of money causing lack of quality.

Did *The Brave Little Toaster* turn out to be a kid flick? Well, that is the most wonderful thing about it. Although it has all the qualities and form of a very good children's story, it has the wit, wisdom and a true, knowing sentiment that makes it a definite crossover property. If I've heard any complaints about *Toaster*, they are about its several musical numbers. Maybe next time an animated feature can be made without musical numbers. Wouldn't that be a change?

Will you ever see *The Brave Little Toaster* at your local theater? Most likely not. Almost all the distributors in Hollywood have seen the film, many have praised it, none have been able to figure out what to



do with it. They have not been able to make the leap of imagination from "I really like it" to "They (the audience) will really like it." It's not that much of a leap, but something in between sure scared them. Consequently, the Disney Channel, which had partly funded the production, exercised their option in February to run the film, thereby sealing its domestic distribution fate and it became a made-for-cable TV movie. A goddamn shame! If life was fair, *Toaster* should have seen light of theatrical distribution. No recent animated film deserved it more. Although it probably is not the animated film that would have grossed over $100 million, I believe it could have done as well, if not better, than the most recent Disney and Bluth films. Considering its far lower negative cost, it is a film that would have been substantially profitable.

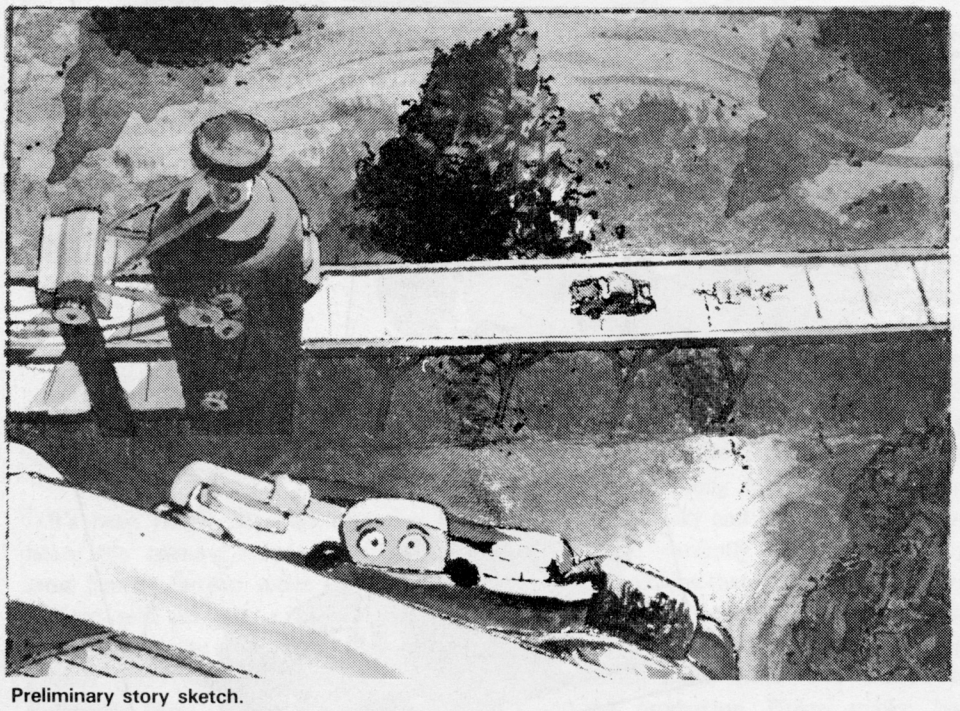
I recently talked with Jerry to find out something about him and his career. He was born in 1956 in Grandview, Texas, but his family soon moved to Loma Linda, California. As a child, he loved performance, writing, music, art and cartoons; in high school he realized that film--and specifically animation--incorporated all of the above. He talked his parents into going 50-50 on a Super-8 camera and he taught himself animation.

He was able to utilize some facilities at the Loma Linda University Medical Film Unit and was noticed by some staff members who took an interest in him. One of the staff who had a connection at Disney and encouraged him to send his films there. A somewhat audacious move for a high schooler, but one that paid off.

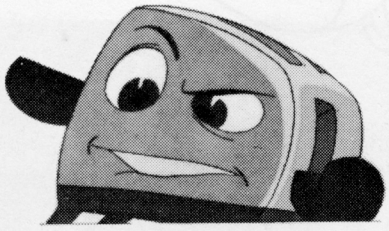
From his sophomore year on, Jerry spent several weeks each summer at the studio being tutored by Eric Larson, one of Disney's famous "Nine Old Men," and the two kept in touch during the school year. His high school graduation dovetailed nicely with the first year of the character animation program at the California Institute of the Arts, a school funded in large part by the Disney family. Jerry was asked not only to be a student, but to assist former Disney director Jack Hannah, who was heading up the program. After only two years, Jerry was asked--along with John Musker, Brad Bird and Henry Selick--to become full-time animators at the Disney Studio.

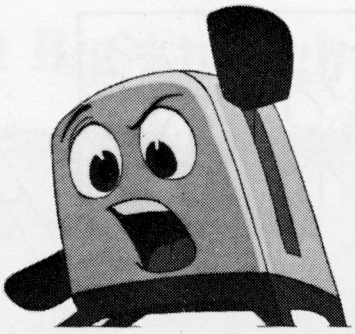
His immediate answer was, "Yes, indeed." He felt that "being at Disney's was going to be a lot more worthwhile schooling than staying at Cal Arts. I got there right at the end of *Pete's Dragon* and it was only a matter of months before I was made a full-fledged animator on *The Small One*. During that time, some of the seeds were planted in my head which later would come up and take blossom in leaving the Studio, going to work on *The Spirit*, on *Toaster*, and all these other things. Don Bluth was directing *The Small One*."

Bluth had a definite philosophy about animation which Jerry was greatly opposed to. "It was," he said, "a philosophy that looked firmly backwards to what had been done in the past rather than being inspired by it and looking forward to new applications of those principles. It became an issue of copying things that had been previously done. There's this wonderful 'morgue' of all the past Disney animation. If you had a particular problem on a scene, you would say, 'Well, how did Frank Thomas, Milt Kahl or Ollie Johnston solve this problem?' And you'd go down to the morgue, pull out a scene, look at it, 'Oh, this is how Frank had a character pick up a cup and drink.' Suddenly, you had your solution. So, instead of feeling it in your gut, acting it yourself,



Preliminary story sketch.





in your mind and expressing it in your animation, it became just a way of copying the solutions *they* had come up using *their* instincts. The result, in my opinion, was a really empty sort of animation."

Jerry's disenchantment with Disney grew in stages. He and other like-minded people hoped to apply their theories of animation to *The Fox and the Hound*. They hoped they could bring to the film modern film techniques, more genuinely felt emotions, better cutting, pacing, staging and even a better sense of dialog. Instead, it became about as uninspired as any one film could be.

At this time, a bunch of the gang from Disney's went to see *Star Wars* for the first time. They came out the theater exhilarated and Jerry thought, "Boy, I would love to work in the film business. I would love to make movies." It took him a minute to realize that, actually, he was in the film business. But where was the exhilaration? It certainly wasn't to be found at Disney's.

It was soon after that that Jerry began looking for other solutions and began working evenings with some friends from the Studio on *The Spirit* with Brad Bird, which had been first conceived at Cal Arts. Bird was then trying to put things together that would lead to its financing, including a full production pencil test reel.

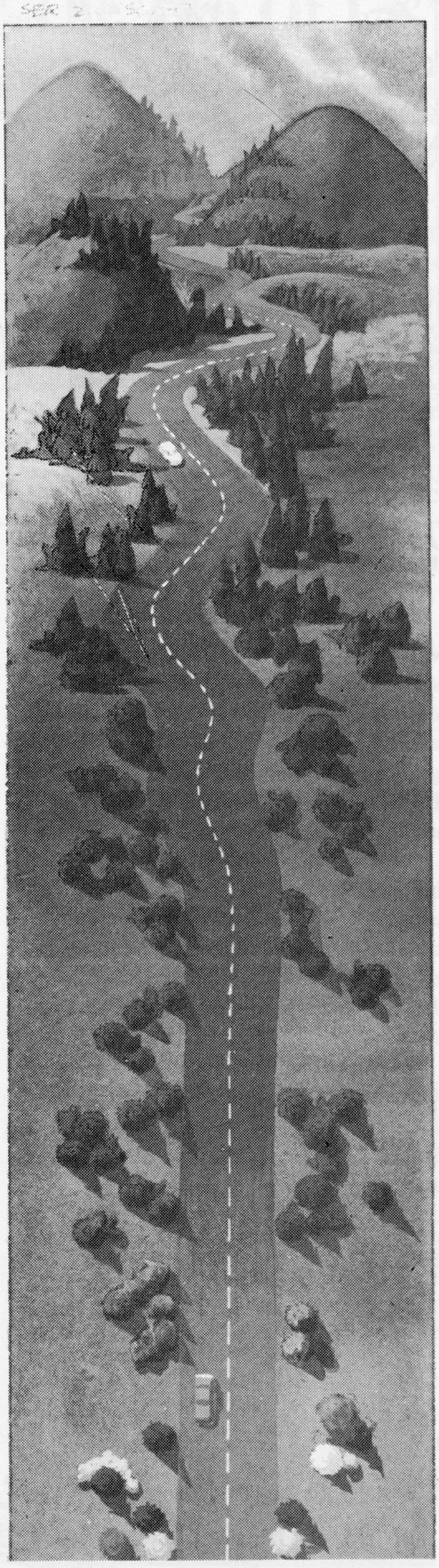
Around this time, Tom Wilhite, Vice President of Production at Disney's, asked Jerry to joint a new live-action film that would use computer animation. The project, of course, was *Tron*, which seemed like a breath of fresh air. Along with Bill Kroyer, Jerry was able to experiment with computer animation, bringing to it all his training in the expressive values of movement.

For the first time Jerry was beginning to feel like a real filmmaker and made it inevitable that he would be very reluctant to return to the animation department at Disney's. Which, at the end of *Tron*, was exactly what Wilhite asked him to do, possibly to helm new animation development. At this time, however, Gary Kurtz had become involved with *The Spirit* and wanted to put it into full development.

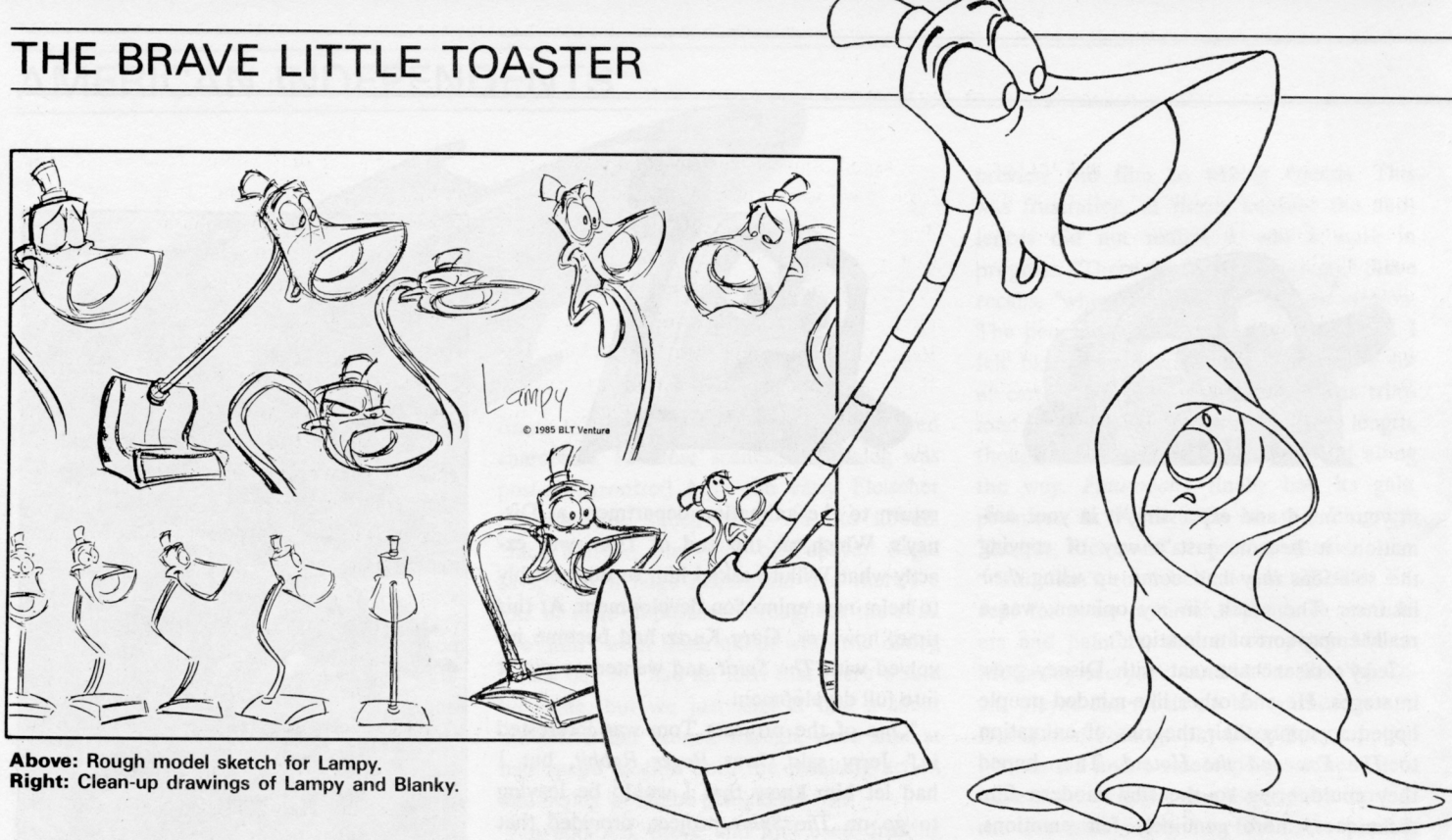
"One of the projects Tom was interested in," Jerry said, "was *Roger Rabbit*, but I had let him know that I would be leaving to go on *The Spirit* project, provided that it would go. Tom wanted to know why he should continue working with me if I was going to ditch the Studio and run off to work with Brad Bird and Gary Kurtz. I told him that I wouldn't just bide my time. 'As long as I'm working for you, I'm going to give you my best shot, because I want to get things accomplished.' He was satisfied with that."

As it turned out, it was only a short time later when Kurtz was ready to have Jerry work on *The Spirit* full-time. Jerry and his wife Rebecca--also a Disney animator--moved up to Marin County, just north of San Francisco, where Kurtz' company, Kinetographics, was located. For two years, Brad and Jerry worked at the E Street School House that had been renovated to make offices. It was both a wonderful and frustrating time. Wonderful because they were being paid to live in a beautiful area of the country and develop *The Spirit* as they saw fit. Frustrating because of Hollywood's rejection of their work and its refusal to back an admittedly ambitious, innovative and radical departure from a form that Hollywood doesn't particularly like, respect or want to be bothered with in the first place.

"At the end of two years," Jerry recalled, "I just decided I was going go on my own and concentrate on personal projects that I had been wanting to get off the ground. I



Preliminary background sketch.



Above: Rough model sketch for Lampy.
Right: Clean-up drawings of Lampy and Blanky.

was starting to realize that you just can't sit on your high tower and say, 'I refuse to do anything unless it is the absolute ideal, and I'm treated perfectly, and it's just going to have the exact result that I want.' For about a year, I worked freelance, but I spent most of my time writing.

"At about the end of that time, Tom Wilhite contacted me. He had started his own company, Hyperion Productions and had taken with him a project that he had started on at Disney's, an animated version of Thomas Disch's novella, *The Brave Little Toaster*.

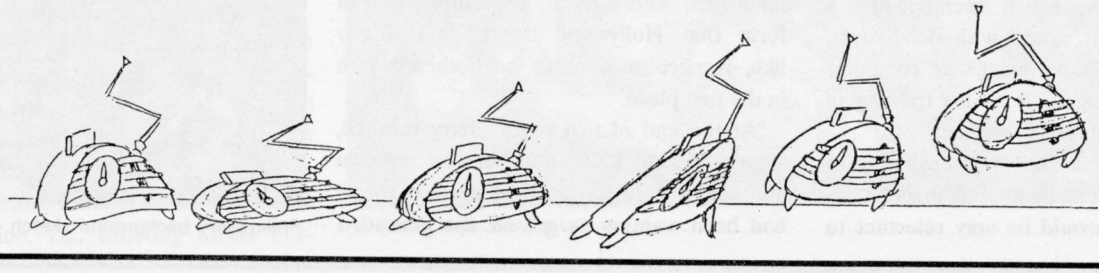
"He asked me to finish the development and direct it as a feature. When I looked at it, I understood why he was talking about further development because, it looked like about enough material to support a half-hour film. I felt him out about how much creative freedom he was willing to allow. I found out that once he's made the decision to hire you, it's because he likes what you do and he gives you a lot of freedom. With that sort of assurance, I felt like, 'Okay, now I'll consider it.'

"I looked at the boards and went back to the original novella. I really loved the tone of the original. There was a lot of very sophisticated and funny references to what it would be like to be an air conditioner or a blanket. One observation was that a blanket and an air conditioner would never get along because they have the opposite jobs in life.

"The story deals with five electric appliances, abandoned in a mountain cottage, who travel hundreds of miles to find their owner. Curiously enough, in the book they find their owner and he doesn't particularly like them and they wind up finding somebody else, an old woman, to own them. There were certain things like this, which I felt worked in book form, but which I didn't want to be the end of a 90-minute feature. So, I decided to start a new tangent that would come out of character.

"The characters had not really been defined during development at Disney. They were mostly lumped together as a group and I really wanted to feel who they were as individuals. So, Joe Ranft and I came up with little bios on each. There was Lampy, the high intensity lamp, high intensity was his character, but he's secretly afraid that he might be a little dim. Blanky, the electric blanket, who is used to being a security blanket for his master, being insecure. The toaster, as the central character, just being very warm. We thought of it in terms of the other characters seeing themselves reflected in the toaster, and where you see yourself, you're comfortable. Nobody argues with him, the toaster is the peacemaker. For Kirby, the vacuum cleaner, it came to mind that vacuums are made to suck things in and hold them inside. So it seemed like that's what we should do with his emotions. He holds his emotions in, he's very gruff, but he's also very responsible, a work horse. At one point in the film, he finally has a nervous breakdown from holding him-

Radio Jump Cycle



self in so much. The radio is just the perpetual entertainer and he'll never be serious about anything. Those sort of explanations, right at the very start, started spawning a direction for the story to take."

What Jerry was used to in the past, the luxury of time, was nowhere in evidence. Wilhite had constraints of time and money to deal with, but he was determined to get the film made and asked Jerry to work within them.

"When we really rolled into gear on the film," Jerry said, "everything was instant. There was no time alloted for story at all. It was just: Storyboarding is going to begin! I feel that, while it is good to explore things in boarding, you should start with a good script."

I asked him is this something different from the way most animated films are made. "Yes," he replied, "but it's something that just feels very natural to me and, interestingly enough, to other people of my ation. Tim Burton (director of *Vincent* and *Beetlejuice*) has gone into live action. Brad Bird is exploring live action as well as animation. Henry Selick is directing things for MTV involving live action and animation.

"A script is an excellent testing ground. If it reads well, you know you've got a good shot at the film coming together. If you start just into boarding, without a sense of where you're going, I think it's easy to get lost. Of course, the Disney tradition of boarding without a script per se, which created some great films, was certainly very real. But there's one very important part of the equation that people seem to forget and that was that Disney himself talked them through what the story was going to be. He had a script in his head."

Jerry managed to get four weeks to do some story work before production began, which was better than nothing. Oddly enough, the urgency gave him a real sense of "putting on a show."

Jerry said he "had heard about the camaraderie that happens with a crew on a live-action shoot. However, I never felt that when we had those sluggish schedules we had at Disney's. But on *Toaster*, there was a fire burning under your rear and you had

Casting

Throughout my interview with Jerry Rees, he emphasized his determination that the production of *The Brave Little Toaster* should be approached as if it were a mainstream live-action film. This became an issue for him only because animation so often has been treated differently by its producers, who seem to hold that "it's only a cartoon" sort of attitude and do not feel that you need to extend the kind of care, attention and creativity that is the hallmark of the best live-action films.

Jerry mentioned one area that I believe deserves special consideration, casting:

"When I was looking for voices for the film, of the first group of people that came through, a lot of them did voices for either commercials or Saturday Morning cartoons. With some exceptions, a good deal of those who auditioned did not give performances. They would merely do a funny voice. If you look at people like Paul Frees and June Foray, they know how to do an interesting character voice that you might also call a funny voice, but they act with it. That has always set them apart. I was really dismayed to hear so many people who are used in today's animation all the time sit down and do just a funny voice for the vacuum or the blanket. The audience wouldn't have believed a second of that.

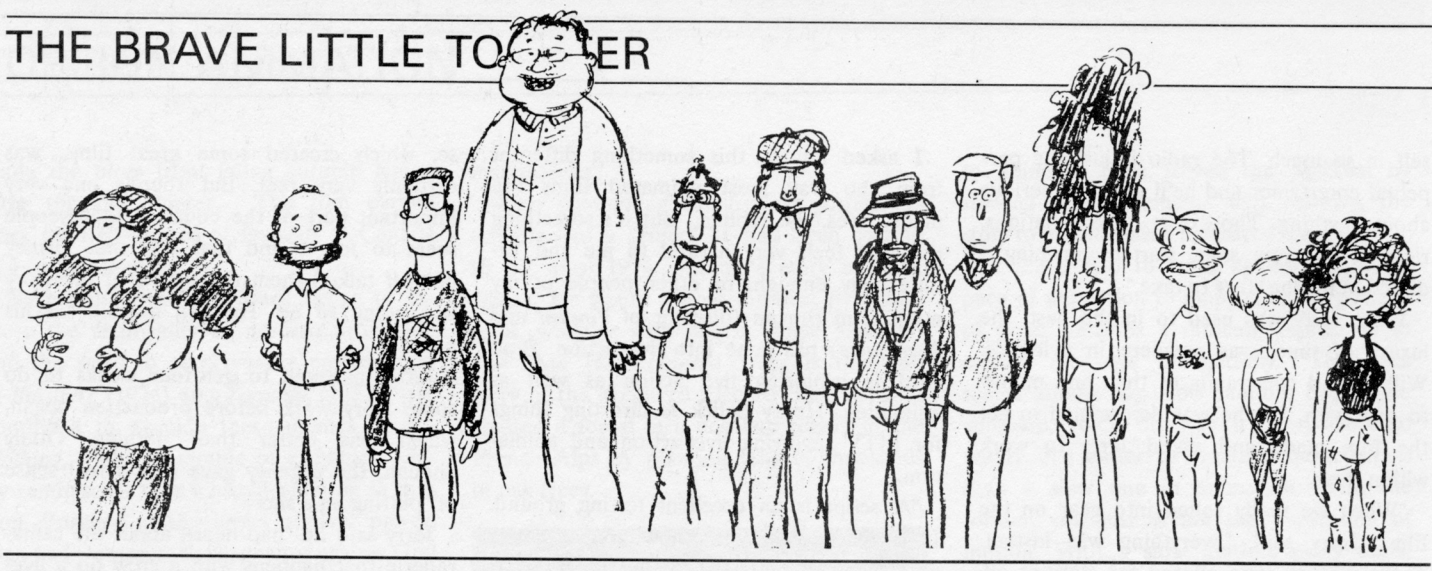
Left to right: Jon Lovitz, Joe Ranft, Jerry Rees.

"Joe Ranft had been taking classes at the Groundling's improv theater in Los Angeles, so I asked him what talents were available from that area. He had the names of a number of people that he had either been in classes with or knew about from the theater. So we sent a call out to the Groundlings that we were going to have an audition and a whole group of them came, several of whom we cast, including: Deanna Oliver, who was the voice of the toaster, Tim Stock, who did Lampy, and Jon Lovitz (now a regular on *Saturday Night Live*) who did radio. (Others later cast included Phil Hartman, also now on *Saturday Night Live*, who did several voices, including a wicked impersonation of Jack Nicholson as the air conditioner. Ranft made it as well, as the voice of the appliance parts man, Elmo St. Peters.)

"Their whole approach to doing a character is taking something--no matter how outlandish--and making it seem real. In their improv sessions, the audience throws crazy things at them, like "You're an asparagus and you want to do Shakespeare," and they suddenly have to play it. So, when I would set up a scene for them, saying, "Okay, now you're a toaster, you're a lamp, you're a radio; you're tired and you're getting on each other's nerves, now play with it," they could really build up a chemistry between the characters. And that's what we needed.

"The only actor we took from the traditional cartoon area was Thurl Ravencroft (best known as Tony the Tiger) who was great as Kirby. Timothy E. Day, this little kid, was just marvelous as the blanket. I hope he gets tons of work because he was probably the most intuitive actor of the whole bunch. We just gave him his motivation and he would do it. We dubbed him "One Take Timmy."

--Steven Paul Leiva



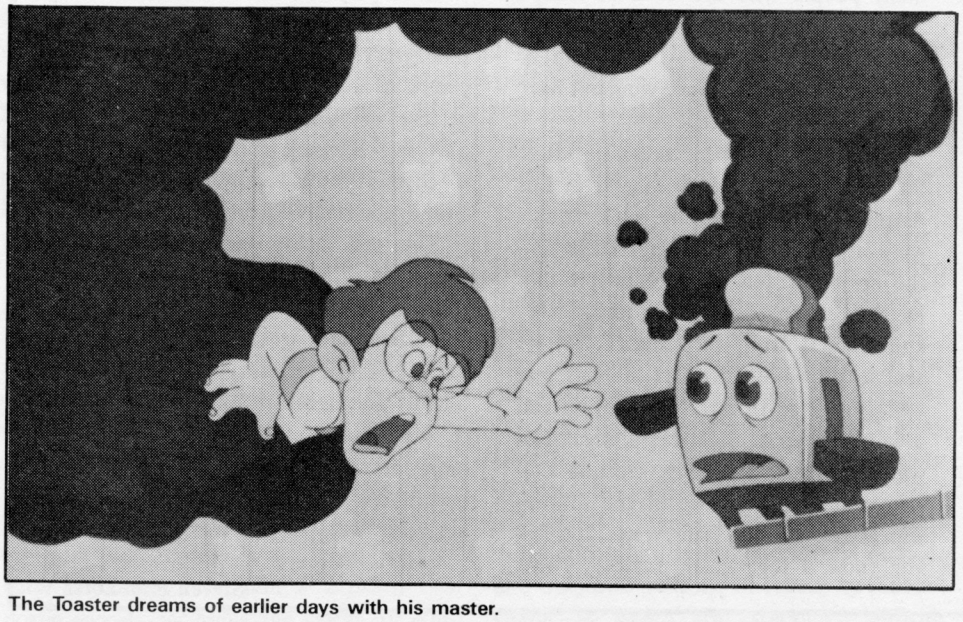
The American crew that went to Taiwan **(left to right):** Rebecca Rees, Jerry Rees, Brian McEntee, Joe Ranft, Steve Segal, Randy Cartwright, Chuck Richardson, Steve More, Chris Wahl, Kevin Lima, Ann Telnaes and Tanya Wilson.

to make it no matter what. In order to get things done, we really had to develop a trust in the crew, a real team had to form, and it did.

"I'm excited about the prospect of continuing in that vein. You approach it as a legitimate filmmaking endeavor, where you are going to get projects done and out to the public in reasonable amounts of time. There's more pressure on everybody, but that can get the adrenaline up, it can show in spontaneous work on the screen, and the energy can speak to the audience."

Jerry and Joe Ranft, with a help from art director Brian McEntee worked nonstop on the script. At the end of the four weeks, the story was pretty much locked down and Jerry was able to finalize the first 15 pages of the script. Then Joe and Jerry, along with Darrell Rooney and Alex Mann, started boarding, while Jerry continued to work on the script.

"This was a specific method we used to try to combat problems of no time, the wearing of many hats," Jerry continued. "It seemed that each person doing many different jobs would simplify things. More responsibility for the person, but as they become more acquainted with the project, they could pull things into the right area. For example, it was no accident that Joe was on story, then on storyboarding, while still contributing notes for the scripting, then became a directing animator. Each time he went on to the next stage, he had a lot more to give, because he had been through things and didn't have to ask questions. This lent consistency to the end product."



The Toaster dreams of earlier days with his master.

The seven months before going to Taiwan, in December 1985, were spent carefully preparing everything that had to be right before animation could begin. This included the design of some 70 characters, doing layout, deciding on color schemes, recording voices, as well as doing some animation tests to establish the type of movement that would be individual to each character.

Jerry oversaw all of this work, a time-consuming process complicated by the fact that he was still writing the script, sometimes keeping only an hour ahead of the storyboarders.

Not quite everything was done when they were due to leave for Taiwan, but they went nonetheless, leaving a small crew in Los Angeles to finish up.

Suddenly, they found themselves in a foreign land, surrounded by people who did not speak their language, trying to produce a film that was--and needed to be--very American.

To make sure that the animation done in Taiwan did not come out looking like Saturday Morning cartoons, Jerry took over a core of American talent, including production manager Chuck Richardson, five animators and three directing animators (Joe Ranft, Rebecca Rees and Randy Cartwright). Once there, they immediately started to train the local animators while starting the production itself.

The work was grueling, often 7 days a

week, 12-14 hours a day. Everything was intense, especially during the 3 months when the bulk of the animation was done. The Taiwanese themselves were workhorses, always giving all they could, wanting very much to get it right.

It was not a perfect production. The first time Jerry saw inbetweens, for example, was when they were in color, a difficult point to order changes. But with his heavy planning, the training, the use of such helpful tools as the NAC Quick Action Recorder--a computerized pencil test device--somehow it all came out and no one was hiding their head in shame.

How does he feel about the film? "On the one hand," he says, "I can stand back and look at it in terms of the ideal that I would like to do, and can find all sorts of things that I would rather have happened another way. I would like to have had more money for backgrounds; to have all the animators who I know in L.A. who are tremendously talented; to have had a sparkle to the animation that we could have had under those circumstances. But I've always felt the heart of what a film is is its characters and its emotions. In that regard, I'm very happy.

"I've probably seen the film over a hundred times. Still, five minutes into the film, I'm lost in what's going on with the characters and I'm with them, and I feel the scenes.

What's in the future for Jerry Rees?

"Well, the most immediate thing," he said, "is that I'm slated to direct *The Smallest Show on Earth*, a live-action comedy written by Babaloo Mandel (who co-wrote *Splash*). I'm also a partner in a new division of Hyperion with Tom Wilhite and William Carrol called Hyperion Animation of all things. We hope to get new features off the ground as well as, hopefully, helping to change the face of animation on television. Essentially, I hope to jump back and forth between live-action and animation.

"I've always loved film and filmmaking, and I feel like animation and live-action--at their best--are so interwoven. They're both visual communication with an audience, making characters come alive, telling a story well. I really feel like they can really feed each other. Letting animation be influenced by some of the advances in live-action filmmaking today will enhance animation. And bringing to live-action some of the more broadly realized imagination that you get with animation will be a positive influence on live-action films."

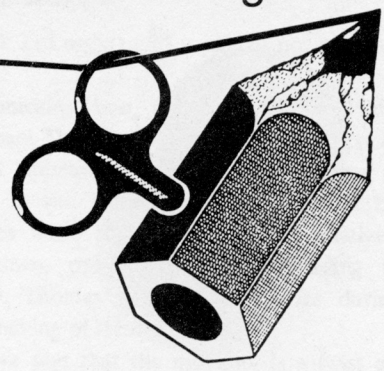
This attitude, that filmmaking is filmmaking is filmmaking, an attitude that does not recognize a boundary between animation and live-action, but at the same time realizes their inherent differences, could well be the attitude that changes things around for animation. There are other factors, of course. But it could all start with an attitude.

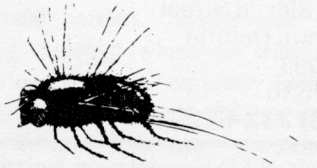
Steven Paul Leiva is currently Vice President, Development, of Winmill Entertainment and is continues his association with Gary Kurtz in their K & L Enterprises. Winmill and K & L will joint venture on the production of Leiva's live-action screenplay, Creature Feature.

EDITORS FROM **45** COUNTRIES!

AN INTERNATIONAL FORUM LINKING CARTOONISTS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD!

WittyWorld
International Cartoon Magazine





One year subscription–4 issues–is **$24**
For air mail delivery add **$12**

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

CITY: _____

STATE: _____ ZIP CODE: _____

COUNTRY: _____

International Money Order or checks in U.S. currency drawn on U.S. banks can be accepted

WittyWorld, Box 1458 North Wales, PA 19454 USA